

s the words nor yet the tune.  
ould have done and any words.  
or no listener at all.

les in rocks or a child crooning  
orld of strange awakening  
no reason but themselves.

s through late November running  
nts tormented, darkness falling,  
sang for miles and miles together

the words or tune. It was the singing.  
man sweetness in that yellow,  
ted voices of our kind.

s playing the piano when quite suddenly  
ere standing in the room.  
not sing or speak or tell their names.  
aces blankly shifted around  
re studying us implacably.  
e said. "Rustics," said another,  
y had come in out of the rain

with their masks tall and white and bony-looking.  
"Macbeth," someone said, and someone, "Hamlet".

10 Or perhaps at least the 'Elegy' by Gray.  
The rain drummed on the roof and they were gone  
in their muddy boots, squelching past cowering doors.  
We looked at each other. It was graveyard time  
as our black ties on our white shirts might say.

### *The Exiles*

*(translated from the author's own Gaelic)*

The many ships that left our country  
with white wings for Canada.  
They are like handkerchiefs in our memories  
and the brine like tears

5 and in their masts sailors singing  
like birds on branches.  
That sea of May running in such a blue,  
a moon at night, a sun at daytime,  
and the moon like a yellow fruit,

10 like a plate on a wall  
to which they raise their hands  
like a silver magnet  
with piercing rays  
streaming into the heart.

e

range light we stared across  
Far Tíree.  
emblazoned your bright knee  
gold to match your hair's gold poise.

changed: the world was as it was  
rs ago. The slaty stone  
nged and aboriginal iron.

nt flower a little, and the grass

s sheep. But from the sea  
k islands rose, beyond the few

isms we let pursue  
e silences. There was no tree

tness to the looks we gave  
ere, inhuman as if tolled  
e bell of iron and gold,  
dam and you no bright Eve.

### *Old Woman*

And she, being old, fed from a mashed plate  
as an old mare might droop across a fence  
to the dull pastures of its ignorance.  
Her husband held her upright while he prayed

5 to God who is all-forgiving to send down  
some angel somewhere who might land perhaps  
in his foreign wings among the gradual crops.  
She munched, half dead, blindly searching the spoon.

Outside, the grass was raging. There I sat  
10 imprisoned in my pity and my shame  
that men and woman having suffered time  
should sit in such a place, in such a state

and wished to be away, yes, to be far away  
with athletes, heroes, Greeks or Roman men  
15 who pushed their bitter spears into a vein  
and would not spend an hour with such decay.

“Pray God,” he said, “we ask you, God,” he said.  
The bowed back was quiet. I saw the teeth  
tighten their grip around a delicate death.  
20 And nothing moved within the knotted head

but with only a few poor veins as one might see  
vague wishless seaweed floating on a tide  
of all the salty waters where had died  
too many waves to mark two more or three.

ashed over them. I saw them when  
r brought them home. It was a day  
e horizon with an enigma.  
at there were masts. It seemed that men  
e water round them. It seemed that fire  
water which was thin and white  
owards the shore. It seemed that I  
fixed hat which seemed to float and then  
ined fish and naval caps,  
e vanished ships. In sloppy waves,  
the water, they came floating home  
nst their island. It is true  
r can inflict this death,  
ot responsible. It shone  
y blouse, the flapping blue  
black boots. The seagulls swam  
e water. Why not man?  
ere lit last night, the tables creaked  
d food. They willed the ship to port  
ear which would erase the old,  
ces, its unpractised tones.  
e ill, I ask? My sober hat  
e water, my fixed body  
n of the transient waste,

25 for everything that was mobile, planks that swayed,  
the keeling ships exploding, and the splayed  
cold insect bodies. I have seen your church  
solid. This is not. The water pours  
into the parting timbers where I ache  
30 above the globular eyes. The slack heads turn  
ringing the horizon without a sound  
with mortal bells, a strange exuberant flower  
unknown to our dry churchyards. I look up.  
The sky begins to brighten as before,  
35 remorseless amber, and the bruised blue grows  
at the erupting edges. I have known you, God,  
not as the playful one but as the black  
thunderer from hills. I kneel  
and touch this dumb blonde head. My hand is scorched  
40 Its human quality confuses me.  
I have not felt such hair so dear before  
nor seen such real eyes. I kneel from you.  
This water soaks me. I am running with  
its tart sharp joy. I am floating here.  
45 In my black uniform, I am embraced  
by these green ignorant waters. I am calm.

ese songs  
udio.  
to a different country,  
y,  
of heather and stone.  
to the sailors  
eir course  
algia and moonlight.  
to the maidens  
the milk in pails  
twilight.  
to the barking of dogs,  
ght of stars,  
errible force,  
equator.  
to the sparse grass,  
ed faces,  
s sunk in the valleys,  
s  
e from the fishing.  
e made of crystal  
moment  
programmes  
m fiercely  
darknesses.

*“You’ll take a bath”*

“And now you’ll take a bath,” she’d always say,  
just when I was leaving, to keep me back.  
At the second turning of the stony stair  
the graffiti were black letters in a book  
5 misspelt and menacing. As I drove away  
she’d wave from the window. How could I always bear  
to be her knight abandoning her to her tower  
each second Sunday, a ghost that was locked fast  
in a Council scheme, where radios played all day  
10 unknown raw music, and young couples brought  
friends home to midnight parties, and each flower  
in the grudging garden died in trampled clay.

Standing by her headstone in the mild  
city of bell-less doors, I feel the sweat  
15 stink my fresh shirt out, as each gravelly path  
becomes a road, long lost, in a bad bet.  
Once more I see the dirty sleepy child.  
“The water’s hot enough. You’ll have a bath.”

And almost I am clean but for that door  
20 so blank and strong, imprinted with her name  
as that far other in the scheme was once,  
and ‘scheme’ becomes a mockery, and a shame,  
in this neat place, where each vase has its flower,  
and the arching window its maternal stance.

d chairs, old mattresses, old books.  
of coiffed women, hatted men,  
h clamped lips and flowing beards,  
s Highland den,  
d among these, old copper fire-guards,  
bottles, stoves and shepherds' crooks.  
  
goes out of fashion and how soon!  
columned leather-covered tomes  
praying Covenantors still  
inst Rome's  
pire. Every article  
ime and dust and sweat and rust. What tune  
  
n that phonograph? Who played  
hed dumb piano? Who once moved  
ite chamber pot through an ancient room?  
s it that loved  
yn reflection in the gloom  
ed mirror? And who was it that prayed  
  
Bible in her fading hands?  
er's quick eyes swop on a glance,  
ovement. In the inner ring  
icious stance  
n, a piece of curtaining,

an hour-glass with its trickle of old sand.

- 25 We walk around and find an old machine.  
On one side pump, an another turn a wheel.  
But nothing happens. What's this object for?  
Imagine how we will  
endlessly pump and turn for forty years  
30 and then receive a pension, smart and clean,  
  
climbing to a dias to such loud applause  
as shakes the hall for toiling without fail  
at this strange nameless gadget, pumping, turning,  
each day oiling the wheel  
35 with zeal and eagerness and freshness burning  
in a happy country of anonymous laws,  
grow older as we look, the pictures fade,  
the stone is changed to rubber, and the wheel  
elaborates its rayed  
40 brilliance and complexity and we feel  
the spade becomes a scoop, cropping the grass,  
  
and the flesh itself becomes unnecessary.  
O hold me, love, in this appalling place.  
Let your hand stay me by this mattress here  
45 and this tall ruined glass,  
by this dismembered radio, this queer  
machine that waits and has no history.

Glasgow many new years ago.  
your breath in the air.  
k, in the long-skirted thirties  
en stood at every corner  
r fag-ends of a failed culture.  
re in George Square  
r Memorial's yellow sword glows bright  
e stone lions mouth at bus and car.  
ed girl strolls slowly by.  
ok. It might be you. But no.  
here's a 1970 sky.  
  
there are statues. Stone remains.  
flesh is transient. On those trams,  
y but to the mind, you bore  
es home to the 1930 slums.  
such warmth," you said. The gaslight hums  
ed shadows tremble on the stair.  
ing is brighter. Pale ghosts walk  
indly chairs, the birchen trees.  
fiercer voltage you are less  
when in winter you  
ck figure, through the gaslight blue.  
  
experience that we cannot share.  
Glaswegians and the Music Hall.  
oranges on an open stall.  
country. And the sparkling Clyde

splashing its local sewage at the wall.  
'This April day shakes memories in a shade  
opening and shutting like a parasol.  
30 'There is no site for the unshifting dead.  
You're buried elsewhere though your flickering soul  
is a constant tenant of my tenement.  
  
You were happier here than anywhere, you said.  
Such fine good neighbours helping when your child  
almost died of croup. Those pleasant Wildes  
35 removed with the fallen rubble have now gone  
in the building programme which renews each stone.  
I stand in a cleaner city, better fed,  
in my diced coat, brown hat, paler hands  
40 leafing a copy of the latest book.  
Dear ghosts, I love you, haunting sunlit winds,  
dear happy dented ghosts, dear prodigal folk.  
  
I left you, Glasgow, at the age of two  
and so you are my birthplace just the same.  
45 Divided city of the green and blue  
I look for her in you, my constant aim  
to find a ghost within a close who speaks  
in Highland Gaelic.  
  
The bulldozer breaks  
raw bricks to powder. Boyish workmen hang  
50 like sailors in tall rigging. Buildings sail  
into the future. The old songs you sang  
fade in their pop songs, scale on dizzying scale.